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ABSTRACT

A study investigated patterns of paragraph structure and organization in 19 short essays in Chinese by Taiwan middle school students. The organization of the writing samples were analyzed and the paragraphs classified according to five types of internal structure: deductive, with the main idea presented at the beginning; inductive, with the main idea following supporting details; topic sentences presented in the middle; inferential; and topic sentence at the beginning and also restated at the paragraph's end. Introduction, body, and concluding paragraphs were categorized by structure, and the most representative paragraphs were translated into English without changing the location of the topic sentence. Results indicate that the students' thought patterns were not completely circular in developing a paragraph, but follow a thought pattern similar to that in English texts. Circular or digressive patterns are most commonly found in the introductory and concluding paragraphs. This implies an effect of Chinese instructional and cultural patterns. Areas for further research are identified, and implications for English writing instruction are noted. (MSE)

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Is Chinese Thought Pattern Linear,
Circular or Both?

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Is Chinese Thought Pattern
Linear, Circular or Both?

The thought pattern of English is dominantly linear in its development (Kaplan, 1980). An English expository paragraph usually begins with a topic statement and is followed by a series of subdivisions of the topic statement, each supported by examples and illustrations. The English paragraph may also use "the reverse procedure" (Kaplan, 1980, p. 402); it may state a whole series of examples and then relate them to a single statement at the end of the paragraph. "The English paragraph development may be discursive, but is never digressive" (Kaplan, 1980, p. 403); everything in the paragraph contributes to the central idea.

Kaplan (1980), studying inter-cultural thought patterns, found that in some languages such as some oriental writing, the writing is marked by indirection which means the development of the paragraph may be said to be "turning and turning in a widening gyre" (p. 406). He, therefore, concludes that each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself and that sequence of thought and grammar are related in a given language.

Reynolds (1993) further points out that ". . . the Chinese education system teaches a specific cultural rhetorical pattern, namely one that tends to be circular, which conflicts with the straight line of the Aristotelian form" (p. 475).

Mohan and Lo (1985) point out that Chinese students develop the ability

to use alternative patterns to the circular one because they are taught to use larger organization patterns later. In a study in Hong Kong, they also found that many Chinese academic organizational patterns are similar to those taught in English.

Research findings on Mandarin Chinese reading processes have also shown that Chinese readers might at first engage in a different perceptual process in processing Chinese characters (Chang, Hung & Tzeng, 1992; Tzeng & Wang, 1983). However, in processing short stories, there are no fundamental differences between readers of English and Chinese as far as the basic reading process is concerned (Tien, 1983). Siu (1986) found that the processing of the Chinese texts at the macro level was similar to that of English material: both are affected by the semantic coherence in the structure.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether the Chinese thought pattern is circular in its development of the paragraphs in an essay or is similar to English which is dominantly linear in its development of paragraphs. For the purpose of this investigation, 19 short essays written by Chinese middle school students on the topic "Dreams for My Future" and are published in the Yio Shu (Lion Cubs) Magazine (1992) for Chinese young readers, are selected for the analysis of the thought patterns. The secondary students were chosen for their ability to write more sophisticated essays, greater stability in writing style, and less contact with reading essays written in English or other

foreign languages which may interfere with their Chinese writing style or paragraph development. These 19 short essays are judged to be very representative because they were written by Chinese middle school students who are considered to be good writers and were selected from among the middle schools throughout Taiwan.

Methods Used in Analyzing the Writing Samples

Singer and Donlan (1989) described four basic paragraph structures: 1) the deduction type of organization; the main idea is presented at the beginning of a paragraph, with the supporting details following it; 2) the induction type of organization; the main idea follows the supporting details; 3) paragraphs with topic sentence presented in the middle; and 4) inferential. Despite these four structures, it is also common to find paragraphs whose topic sentence is presented deductively and then restated at the paragraph final position.

In this study, three native Chinese graduate students were invited to participate in analyzing the 19 writing samples using the five paragraph structures. The three types of paragraphs, the introduction paragraph; the body paragraphs; and the concluding paragraph, in each of the writing samples were individually analyzed to yield a percentage of occurrence based on the five paragraph structures. To present examples in the findings, the most representative sample paragraphs were translated into English without chang-

ing the location where the topic sentence was presented (See Appendix A).

Findings

Introduction paragraph There are 19 introduction paragraphs in the introduction position. The topic sentence in the introduction falls into two categories: the topic sentence clearly stated and the topic sentence not stated.

A. The topic sentence clearly stated:

There are four ways or in three different positions that the Chinese middle school writers use in placing the topic sentence in the introduction paragraph.

1. The topic sentence is the introduction paragraph. 5.26 percent of the middle school writers introduce the topic this way. For example:

To be an archaeologist is my dream.

2. The topic sentence appears at the paragraph initial position. 21.05 percent of the middle school writers place the topic sentences at this position. For example:

I have made up my mind to be an athlete since I was a little child. Just look at the prevalence of the baseball sports. If I could have a competition on the field in front of thousands of people, I would feel very proud and honored.

3. The topic sentence appears in the paragraph middle position. 10.53

percent of the middle school writers place the topic sentences at this position.

For example:

When I was a little child, I had read many books or stories which described about famous astronomers, such as Nicolaus Copernicus. . . Therefore, I had made up my mind to be an astronomer. I could stargaze very often and observe the beautiful but mysterious starry sky.

4. The topic sentence appears at the paragraph final position. 21.05 percent of the middle school writers place the topic sentences at this position.

For example:

The great but unattainable crazy dreams for being the president of a nation, or a great physician, or an inventor never come into my mind. I do not have any big aspiration, therefore, I am able to embrace my dream happily forever - to travel around the world.

B. The topic sentence not stated or digressive:

42.11 percent of the middle school writers did not clearly state the topic sentence in the introduction paragraph. The following three examples exemplify the ways most of them introduce the topic.

While pondering, I would think of the strings of beautiful dreams, which are like bottles of good wine. (topic: Dream for

Travel)

The author used this sentence as a paragraph in the introduction. She did not clearly state what she would like to do for her dream for travel. Instead, she described what her dream was like.

When I was a little child, I always talked about my dream with my childhood friends. It is very difficult to predict what will happen to my dream in the future, however, who dares to say that my dream will not come true? (topic: Dream for Travel)

The author did not state what his dream for traveling was about; instead, he stated what might happen to his dream.

When a little bird has grown up, it will open its wing and fly away into the clear sky to find its dream. I also would like to discard my youthful mind, and as a full-fledged bird, soar into the sky of my dream; full of hope and wishes. (topic: Dream for Future Career)

The author did not directly state what was the career in her dream in the introduction paragraph; instead, she used a simile to state why she would like to have a dream for her future career.

Body paragraphs The number of paragraphs included in the body varies from author to author. Two paragraphs are the most common length. The analysis includes 28 paragraphs that appeared in the body. There are four

places that middle school authors use to place the topic sentence.

1. Appearing in the paragraph initial position. 53.57 percent of the middle school writers place the topic sentences at this position. For example:

When I was a little child, I dreamed of being a car racer. The feeling of competing with the wind is really wonderful. I like all kinds of racing, regardless of using bicycles, motorcycles, or cars.

2. Appearing in the paragraph middle position. 10.71 percent of the middle school writers place the topic sentences at this position. For example:

After I read 'The Biography of Einstein', I knew that this great genius discovered a revolutionary theory, . . . Then, I wished that I could become a bright scientist as he was, for he knew and discovered many theories. I have been adoring him since I read his biography . . .

3. Appearing in the paragraph final position. 25 percent of the middle school writers place the topic sentences at this position. For example:

. . . I have many dreams since I was a little child. I dreamed to be a princess, to be able to fly, and to meet with ETs. . . . However, as I have grown older and older, I realize that these dreams would not come true. Now, I have a more realistic dream - to be a traveler.

4. The topic sentence appears at the paragraph in initial position and is restated at the paragraph final position of the paragraph. 3.57 percent of the middle school writers place the topic sentences at this position. For example:

I dream to be a traveler, for I could visit the scenery or the wonderlands in the myth and understand the custom around the world . . . I also want to visit the vast oceans and the endless beaches . . . I even want to travel to the other side of the world to see whether the magic kingdoms in 'Jing Hwa Yuan' are really existing . . . To travel around the world has long been the dream that has fascinated me.

The remaining 7.14 percent of the samples had paragraphs that the topic sentence is absent, however, the readers can infer the main idea of the paragraphs.

Concluding paragraph The analysis has revealed two types of strategies that have been used to conclude an essay.

1) digressive or not tied to the topic. 73.68 percent of the middle school authors use this strategy. For example:

I believe that to be an athlete one should not pursuit the enjoyment of money and materials but should exercise his/her body and mind in order to transcend himself/herself. (topic: Dream to Be An Athlete)

Dream is the dynamics of one's success. People make progress because they continuously pursuit their dreams. I hope I can achieve my dream; thus, I could benefit all human beings. (topic: Dream for Future Career)

2) Closely tied with the topic. 26.32 percent of the middle school writers use this strategy. For example:

Many years later, I will look back again and will realize that I was crazy and ridiculous when I was young. However, I will not regret about what I had written. After all, nothing could replace my dream for being a writer. (topic: Dream for Future Career)

Suddenly, a question flashes up on my mind - 'Where should I travel first?' Let me think about it later!" (topic: Dream for Travel)

Table A contains summaries of the percentages of the locations where the topic sentences appear in the introduction paragraph and the body paragraphs and the paragraph development considered to be circular or digressive.

Table A: Percentages of Topic Sentence Location

Types of paragraphs Locations of main idea	Introduction Paragraph	Body Paragraphs	Conclusion Paragraph
Main idea stated:	57.89%	92.86%	--
1. One short sentence as a paragraph	5.26%	0%	10.5%
2. Paragraph initial	21.05%	53.57%	--
3. Paragraph middle	10.53%	10.71%	--
4. Paragraph final	21.05%	25%	--
5. Paragraph initial & final	0%	3.57%	--
Inference needed	0%	7.14%	--
Digressive	42.11%	0%	--
Relevant to topic	--	--	26.32%
Digressive or not tied to the topic	--	--	73.68%
Total	100%	100%	--

Note: -- means not calculated or not analyzed.

Discussions

The results of the analysis indicate that the thought patterns of the Chinese middle school writers are not completely circular in developing a paragraph. In most cases, the writers developed the paragraphs following the same thought pattern as often seen in English texts. The results indicate that some writers may be digressive or circular in developing paragraphs; however, the digression does not occur randomly. The types of paragraphs such as the introduction paragraph or the concluding paragraph are where most of the writers have digressed or become circular.

The results have shown that there is a tendency for the writers to become digressive or circular in developing the introduction paragraph. This is consistent with Liu's (1983) classroom observation that digression is the most common problem for most Chinese pupils and many elementary school students are unable to specify the main ideas and are unable to gather information in writing.

The great number of the writers, 42.11 percent, who were digressive in the introduction paragraph indicates that it is possible that the Chinese teachers teach the students to use a particular style in introducing a topic. It is possible that many of the Chinese elementary or middle school teachers teach the students to begin an essay (or in Chinese term, to break a topic) by using more

ornate or literal wording or sentence structures. It may also be influenced by the Chinese traditional view of dealing with people which is that being less direct is considered more polite and is a way of handling business.

Other factors, such as the audiences, may influence the writers' being circular or digressive. Moore (1990), in a study of the effects of audience on letter writing of fifth, eighth, and twelfth grade students, found that when writing to low intimacy audiences of the teacher and administrator, the students provided more support for their arguments, used more complex syntax, and wrote a content that was higher in quality and more coherent. This analysis also finds that Chinese proficient writers write more elaborately and they are able to place the main idea of a paragraph at the initial position or restate the main idea at the final position in different wording.

The teachers' literacy-learning style might also unconsciously influence the pupils in the writing classrooms. In Taiwan, all college Chinese literature majors (most of them may become classroom teachers) are required to read and use the Chinese written classical language (wen-yen) (Foster & Purves, 1991) which is a very ornate and circular writing style. Furthermore, being able to use the wen-yen style is considered more literate, and well-educated people tend to use less punctuation (Yang, 1971). This has also been reflected in choosing reading selections for secondary school and elementary school readers. Liu (1983) points out that reading selections for school readers are

often too ornate in wording and too elegant in phrasing.

The great percentage of the writers who used a more direct thought pattern in developing the introduction paragraph and the body paragraphs indicates that the middle school writers understand the writing strategies and the importance of attracting the attention of the readers by placing the topic sentence in an obvious location. It also indicates that the thought pattern of Chinese writers is not always circular.

A majority of students, 73.68 percent, who were digressive in concluding an essay may be related to the ideology of the political propaganda. This is reflected in the Chinese traditional view of evaluating the usefulness of a conduct or an effort which has to be related to the concept of contribution to the common good of the society in general. It may be also an influence of the teachers' view in concluding a piece of writing.

Limitations and Further Studies

The findings of this research are only based on the analysis of the middle school students' descriptive writing. Most of the writings are considered to be written by good middle school writers. Although the findings indicate that the Chinese thought pattern in developing the paragraphs of an essay is not completely circular, to make a definite conclusion about the Chinese thought pattern, the following factors should be further researched:

1. Since school teachers influence students' writing, there is a need to analyze the Chinese school teachers' thought pattern in developing paragraphs; especially when considering the audiences in different types of text structure such as antecedent/consequent, comparison, description, response, and time order.

2. Since reading the classical writings is the major requirement for most college Chinese majors in Taiwan, research is needed to analyze how the classical Chinese writing has been developed in different types of text structure.

3. There is a need to find out how the awareness of audiences in writing influences Chinese students in Taiwan in developing essays of different types of text structure.

Implications

Reading and writing share many of the same characteristics; both are language and experience based, both require active involvement from language learners, and both must be viewed as acts of making meaning for communication. Reading and writing both involve audience and purpose. As Tierney and LaZansky (1980) have suggested, readers must think about writers, and writers must think about readers. Writing is intended to be read. Therefore, student writers should be instructed to consider the readers; they

should learn to use a set of consistent writing conventions which can be shared by the readers.

In learning a different language, the thought patterns between the native language and the target language should be specified in order to facilitate reading and writing instruction. As in teaching English as a foreign or second language to Chinese people, the teachers should understand the Chinese thought pattern and in what way it is different from the English thought pattern. The findings of this study can provide a direction for those teachers when instructing Chinese students to read and write English. The diversity in developing the introduction paragraph may challenge the teachers. However, the teachers should understand why a Chinese student always fails to write a paragraph that, to a native English speaker, is irrelevant to the topic.

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Appendix A

The following Chinese passages are the original versions translated into English that appear on pages 3 to 7. The number that appears before each of the following passages is the sequence of the English translated version that appears on pages 3 to 7. (Chinese reads from top to down then right to left)

1. 成為考古學者一直是我唯一的夢想。
2. 從小我就立志作個運動員。看看現在棒球的風行，要是能在球場上面對成千上萬的觀眾比賽，真會感到無比的榮耀。
3. 記得小時候看過一系列講天文學家的書，像哥白尼的故事，想著：「研究天文真好，還可以看星星呢！」於是我立志要當個天文學家，夜晚經常看星星，想試著觀察美麗而奧妙的星空。
4. 總統、神醫、發明家，這偉大遙遠的狂想，從未在我腦中出現；也就因為生平無大志，所以才得以永久快樂地擁抱我的夢想——浪迹天涯。
5. 沈思時，我就會想到那串美麗的夢，那串夢好像一罇香純的美酒。
6. 小時候，常和幾個鄰家小孩談論屬於自己的夢想，雖然說未來的事難以預料。但，誰又能說它完全不可能發生呢？
7. 小鳥大了，羽毛漸豐，就準備要展翅飛翔，在萬里晴空追尋自己的夢想，而我也要收拾童稚的心，滿懷希望，邁向追夢的路途。
8. 小時候我就夢想當一名賽車手，因為那種與風競跑的快感真是奇妙，不管是腳踏車、摩托車、汽車、越野車等等，我都很喜歡。我也喜歡看電視上的體育節目，每次看到選手們奔馳的場面，就羨慕不已。
9. 後來又讀了一本「愛因斯坦傳」，知道這個偉人，天才般的發現革命性的理論，我驚歎不已，十分欽佩。而且愛因斯坦十六歲就開始思索有關光的物理問題，使我想到我也超過這年紀的一半了，於是又夢想著自己將來也能成為像他那樣聰明的科學家，知道許多道理，又能發現新的理論。
10. 所以，我從小就有好多夢想：夢想當公主、夢想會飛、夢想和外星人見面……不過，漸漸長大之後，也就明白這些夢想是不可能成真的。如今我有個更大的夢想——作個旅行者。
11. 我立志作個旅行家，希望能看見各地的風景，習俗及神話中的仙境，親身體驗各地的生活方式。也要看浩瀚而廣闊的大海，一望無際的沙灘、綠油油的青草地及舉步沙沙的沙漠等形形色色的景觀。甚至要繞到世界的另一端，看看是否有一箇花樣一中人謙讓而有禮的君子國，走路搖來搖去的搖擺國和長耳聾的聾耳國。環遊世界是我既著迷又期待的夢。
12. 不管多少年後，回首年少，是如此的輕狂可笑，但我也將無怨無悔，畢竟，寫作是任何東西都無法取代的夢想。
13. 而且我覺得，作運動員不要追求金錢、物質上的享受，而應該鍛鍊身心，超越自我。
14. 夢想是促使人成功的原動力，人們追夢，才能不斷進步，希望我能實現我的夢，來回饋整個社會，也為全人類造福。
15. 突然，有個疑問閃過我腦海：我該先去那個地方呢？慢慢想吧！